



## PERSPECTIVES

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# The Qatar Opposition: Avoiding the Hariri Miscalculation

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The widely criticized attempted resignation by Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri backfired as a political move against Iran for two reasons: first, because Hezbollah is already largely in control of the Lebanese government; and second, because the Saudis, who backed the move, have little leverage inside the country. Continuing efforts to effect similar change inside another Iran proxy, Qatar, are bound to fail for similar reasons. In order to succeed, the Saudis and their allies should build authentic relationships with potential supporters and create an environment receptive to their interests.

Lebanese PM Saad Hariri's tendered his resignation while he was in Riyadh, purportedly under pressure from the Saudi government. Shortly after his return to Lebanon, he then withdrew his resignation and awkwardly tried to claim that it had been done for dramatic effect.

This non-resignation drew concern, if not outright mockery – not because it took place under duress, but because it failed so spectacularly. Now, Hariri, in an effort to [mitigate](#) the damage done to the public image of all the parties involved, is taking his first trip to the kingdom since these events.

The thrust of the original story is that Hariri was invited to Saudi Arabia and there was induced to resign. Some speculated that he was being held hostage until he agreed, though all parties denied these rumors.

Regardless, the apparent purpose of the move was to send a signal to Hezbollah, the Islamist terrorist organization and Iranian proxy that now controls most of the Lebanese government and institutions. Many Christians

residing in Lebanon have chosen to align themselves with Hezbollah, which likewise enjoys popular support among the Shiite citizens of the country. The power play failed for a straightforward reason: as Hezbollah largely controls the government, it doesn't much matter whether Hariri or someone else is in place. Anyone who is neither Hezbollah nor its ally is essentially a powerless puppet in Lebanon.

Why the Saudis ever thought that Hariri carried sufficient weight to shift the political direction in Lebanon is the real enigma here. The operation also plainly lacked finesse and drew the kind of international attention, speculation, conspiracy theories, and outrage that were almost certain to backfire on its originators. Although the Saudis and the UAE have [assisted](#) Lebanon with the issue of displaced Syrians, by 2016, the kingdom had cut billions of dollars in [humanitarian aid](#) to Lebanon, allowing Tehran to move in even further.

By November 2017, it had become clear that the Saudis view [Hezbollah](#) (and the remnants of the Lebanese government, which has been subsumed into the organization) as an aggressor state in cahoots with Iran, Qatar, and the Houthi rebels in Yemen. Nor are they wrong.

The aggressive strategy of countering Iranian proxies and allies makes sense. However, the execution of this operation could have enjoyed greater success had the Saudis 1) not alienated much of their popular support through the punitive cuts in humanitarian aid; and 2) differentiated between Hezbollah and its facilitators and regular people who, in many cases, have ended up supporting the organization for lack of any better alternatives.

However, despite the harsh criticism levied at Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman over this episode, it was no more than a bump in the road, and the line of reasoning behind it was essentially correct. The Lebanese leadership opposed to Hezbollah cannot go along to get along; it enables the worst practices of the organization and thus betrays its constituents.

The Saudis should not be discouraged by the vocal reactions of the international community, but rather refine their approach in Lebanon and try to reengage with a combination of hard and soft power after taking some time to plan out the next steps. Those steps are not hard to define. Riyadh can surely recommit to providing assistance, but this time restructure its efforts to bypass the enemy-led government and corrupt institutions. It can focus instead on education and skills training, encourage entrepreneurship, and direct grassroots humanitarian relief, as well as diversify its proactive partnerships.

The brunt of denunciations should be reserved for those who deserve it most: Tehran and the Hezbollah leadership. Any rhetoric intended to reach the population of Lebanon should reflect the obvious fact that these people are hostage to an organized crime operation with an Islamist agenda. Over time, goodwill and trust based in consistency and patience will build up, and the Crown Prince will be better positioned in terms of public support to take more decisive steps that might prove more meaningful and effective than what Hezbollah has bargained for.

Muhammad bin Salman should avoid repeating the mistake of acting too hastily, even with good motives. For instance, some analysts claim that the crown princes of Saudi Arabia and UAE tried to [instigate](#) a soft coup in Qatar, which would have displaced the Iran-aligned emir (along with another family member). Such a move was perceived as nothing more than another power play in the Middle Eastern Game of Thrones, discrediting the kingdom's laudable efforts at countering religious extremism and Iran-backed aggression in the region. The attempt to depose Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani was chalked up to a self-serving agenda of downgrading a local rival. Along with the blockade, this step hurt the credibility of both countries without really shaking the emir.

There are two reasons for this perception. The first is the Saudi failure to communicate its deteriorating relationship with Qatar over Iran, the Muslim Brotherhood, and other matters in the years leading up to the Crown Prince's appointment (the same goes for the UAE) and the lack of any explanation for interference in another country's governance. Second, not much was known about Sheikh Tamim's rival. In addition, the emir's influence in his own circles was too strong, and the history of tensions between the two countries was well known.

Simply put, the crown princes had not yet built up the rapport with the right people to have ensured success. Any operation requires preparation, both logistical and psychological. While the logistical details of this incident are not yet completely public, the chain of events that led up to it – the escalation of tensions, the imposition of the humanitarian blockade, and the appointment of the new Crown Prince in Saudi Arabia – left no room for the element of surprise that is essential in such ventures.

A new leader of the Qatari opposition has emerged, and the Saudis and the Emiratis have an opportunity to avoid repetition of their mistake. The new [candidate](#) is Sheikh Mubarak al-Thani, who resides in Riyadh, claims to have a number of proposals for reforming the country, and has asked Saudi Arabia to host talks. There is also Khalid al-Hail, a Qatari businessman living

abroad. Hail has capitalized on the recent controversy surrounding Qatar's outreach campaign to conservative, religious American Jews. The head of the PR firm that represents him, Steve Rabinowitz, recently confronted one of the beneficiaries of Qatar's free trips to Doha, ZOA's Mort Klein, in an op-ed exchange that further fueled the fires of the American Jewish community divide over whether or not to embrace Qatar.

None of these steps augurs particularly well, despite their seeming logic, and for the same reasons: they are too blunt and they come directly on the heels of failed efforts. To avoid further failures and ensure success, the Qatari opposition should not imitate the Qatari government's methods in finding allies, but rather develop an independent and innovative strategy that does not involve hiring agents of influence in other countries – a tactic that makes as many enemies as friends. Also, the Qatari opposition needs real credibility with both the family and the tiny Qatari population.

The opposition should focus discussion on its proposals rather than on its connections to the Saudis, or on the well-known distrust of Qatar's approach to foreign policy. Most importantly, it should not appear to be a mere pawn of Saudi ambitions. Its proposals should not be solely reactive to the shortcomings of Qatar's current system but should entail a positive vision for the country, its relationships with its neighbors and others, and its role in the region.

The opposition must work on building meaningful relationships with the international community, which would confer upon it a degree of legitimacy and project its competence and understanding of the country's and the region's needs. These relationships should include security assistance and address human rights and economic development.

For their part, the Saudis should take a much more low-key approach. Counterintuitive though it may seem, they should allow the opposition to take the lead and allow their actions to speak for themselves. The kingdom can refocus on building regional credibility. Providing evidence of success of its own internal reforms beyond the superficial gloss of headlines will build up its role as regional leader in an organic way.

For instance, it would be a tacit rebuke to Qatar if the Saudis were to explain how the removal of preexisting governors and other lower level officials promotes the country's anti-corruption campaign and benefits the residents of the provinces rather than simply boosting the power of the monarchs. Cracking down on abuse against servants and making that crackdown very public and consistent would also send a strong message to a country scandalized by the gross abuse of workers involved in the building of a sports stadium. Taking the

time to explain how various steps of modernization, including the recent inclusion of women in the military, will benefit lower income families and struggling women (not just young women from well-to-do and liberal households) will help change the image of the kingdom in a positive way while boosting its credentials for supporting regime change elsewhere.

Another issue to be considered is the success of Qatar's PR campaign in the West. Given that President Trump has committed to hosting annual US-Qatar talks, and will likely be looking to dissuade the anti-Terrorism Quartet from continuing the blockade, even the backing of the opposition – much less any steps that are seen as counterproductive, aggressive, meddling, troublemaking, or destabilizing – will likely be met with a sharp rebuke from the US administration (and more likely other unpleasant consequences and embarrassment for all involved). At the same time, the Crown Princes should keep in mind that any future attempts at engineering a coup will likely be met with accusations of hypocrisy, given the strong negative reaction to Qatar's own attempted coup in Bahrain in 2011, which significantly contributed to the current crisis.

None of this is to say that the answer to Qatar's wrongdoing is to sit back and hope for the West to come to the rescue. Rather, the leaders of the concerned states should use persuasion, fact-based substantiation of their case, trust-building, and engagement to prepare receptive ground for their plans to change the government. It should not come to be seen as disruptive to the relationship between Qatar and other countries. In fact, the Saudis and the UAE, pressured as they are by Qatar's contribution to Iran's expansionism, should take the time to plan out a strategy of inducing natural criticism of the emir and his actions in the West.

An evolutionary approach to soft coups will help heal the wounds of past failings and soften the reaction of the international community, which is already up in arms over other defensive actions by the anti-Terrorism Quartet. Qatar should come to be seen as a regional and global problem rather than as an underdog being attacked by hasty, misbehaving monarchs. Though the Saudis, Emiratis, Bahrainis, and Egyptians may be under a great deal of pressure, and perhaps are even facing existential threats, they still need to do everything possible to make their attempts at addressing these threats effective, helpful, and constructive. It is the bad actors who should be punished for their actions. It would be a shame if due to miscalculation, miscommunication, or poor planning, the good guys should suffer blowback for sound, well-intentioned responses.

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